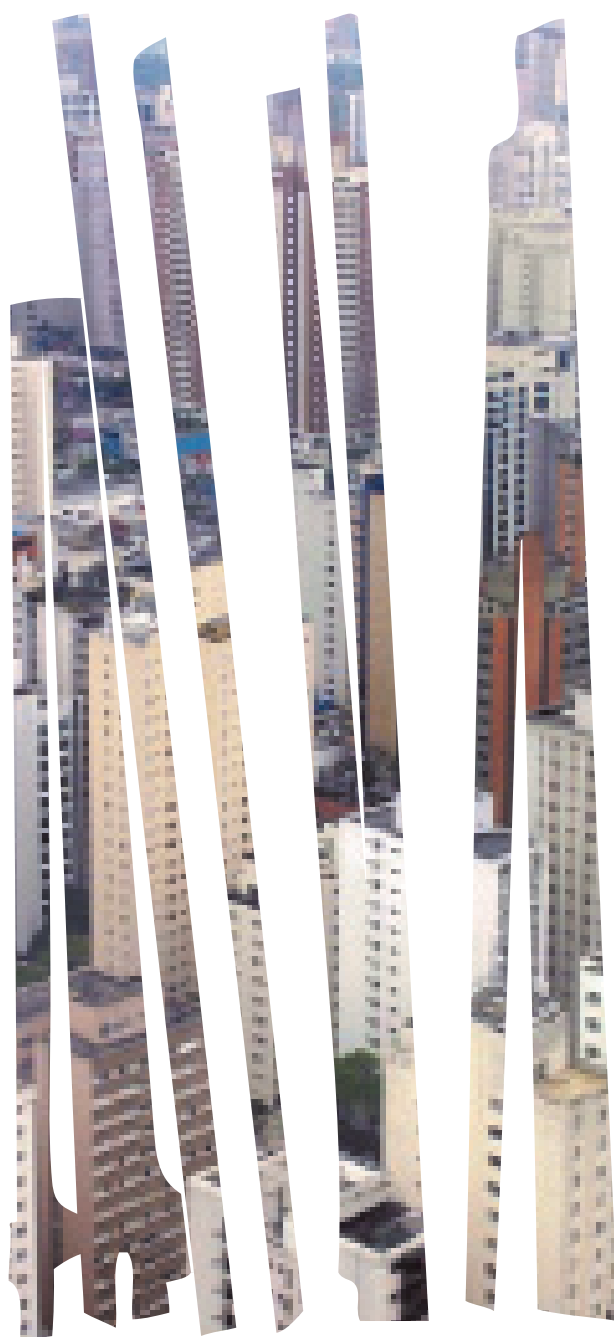


**Working Paper, No. 20, 2012**

# **Environment and Socioeconomic Inequalities in Latin America**

Notes for a Research Agenda

Roberto P. Guimarães



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Research Network on Interdependent  
Inequalities in Latin America



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## Environment and Socioeconomic Inequalities in Latin America

### Notes for a Research Agenda

Roberto P. Guimarães<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

One key objective of the desiguALdades Research Network is to overcome the excessive focus on topics related to the state and national social configurations, and unveil instead the interdependent trans-regional relations present today in the various economic and non-economic dimensions of inequality. A research agenda about the connections between environmental challenges and the deepening of inequalities in Latin America is supposed to address several aspects. At the outset, one must recognize that phenomena associated with inequality are more relevant than those linked to poverty alone, which, in addition to its intrinsic importance to the social sciences, carries immediate implications to the formulation of adequate public policies. Likewise, one also needs to replace the focus on the economic aspects of inequality, and explore its non-economic aspects, which are directly tied to the complexity of the social relations and much more akin to the goals of the network. Hence, the proposed research agenda pays special attention to consumption patterns and their growing inter-regional homogenization, because among other aspects, these reveal interdependent variables embedded in recent inequality trends. In fact, making use of consumption patterns allows one to analyze key processes unfolding today, especially their interrelationship with other phenomena and processes, such as globalization, the differences between situations of inequality in national and local levels, the predominance of increasingly speculative financial capital, not linked to production and thus decoupled from the real economy, as well as key actors who are behind in these processes and who turn these into structural causes of deepening inequalities in Latin America and elsewhere.

**Keywords:** Environment | Consumption | Inequality

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## 1. Introduction

In order to overcome the current paradigms for development, one must acknowledge that the current sustainability crisis reveals the exhaustion of an ecologically disruptive, socially perverse, politically unjust and ethically reprehensible style of development. Moreover, sustainable development also implies heightening inter-generational justice. It postulates that each human being and every generation must have guaranteed rights to the same environmental endowment, cultural and socioeconomic resources available to the preceding generations. In view of the fact that more than half of the generation which will live the second half of this century has already been born, the proposed equality between generations is entangled, in fact, with the current needs and not at some moment in a remote future disconnected from present dynamics.

Advocating for the interests of future generations is not only a matter of values and socio-environmental ethics. It is a matter of public policy and of decisions that address the immediate present, a time in which different generations share the same history, even though with different power resources to define the present and adjust the route towards the future. Hence, the analysis of the challenges posed by the deepening of poverty and the growing social inequalities constitutes an ethical and moral duty with serious implications for sustainability both in the short and long run.

Recent developments have reinforced the finding that the growth and deepening of poverty and inequality are structural features of the current development style, reinforced by the treadmills of trade and financial globalization. In this regard, and as will be seen along these reflections, poverty and inequality constitutes two sides of the same reality. As aptly summed up by Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, “millions of people around the world experience [globalization] not as an agent of progress but as a disruptive and even destructive force, while many millions more are completely excluded from its benefits” (Annan, quoted in Grunberg and Khan 2000: 18).

## 2. Increasing Economic Inequality

Economic growth has been considered by neoliberal economists as an essential prerequisite to simultaneously abate poverty and inequality. Framed in that ideology, liberalization policies promoted by the Washington Consensus from the 1980's on were based on the assumption that the benefits of higher economic growth would be trickled down to the poor. After three decades, the “consensus” is no longer such. Recognition is growing that, regardless of how much the national product grows, the reduction of

poverty or a more equitable distribution of income, assets and access to social services have a better chance of success when governments implement policies that explicitly promote equity and equality, including, among others, initiatives to promote universal access to resources, income, education and employment.

Despite the debate on global trends, many believe that there has been a moderate improvement in the distribution of income in the last two decades (Berry and Serieux 2004, Sala-i-Martin 2002). Meanwhile, a closer look reveals a not so positive picture. Most of the improvement of global income is explained by the rapid economic growth in China and, to a lesser extent, India, and a significant proportion of the progress of the poorest sectors took place at the expense of lower middle-income strata. Moreover, if China and India are excluded from the analysis, the data show that there has been an almost exponential growth of inequality in the world since 1980, caused by the combined effects of increased intra-country disparities and the adverse effects of rapid population growth on poor countries. Globally, the richest 10 percent of the planet increased their share in the total income from 51.6 to 53.4 percent, and that the gap between them and the poorest sector grew wider (Bourguignon and Morrison 2002; Berry and Serieux 2002).

The data also indicate that per capita income in all developing regions except Southeast Asia has declined between 1980 and 2001 in relation to the high-income countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Relative per capita income levels in Sub-Saharan Africa fell from 3.3 to 1.9 percent, in the Middle East and North Africa from 9.7 to 6.7 percent and in Latin America and the Caribbean from 18 to 12.8 percent. The observed decrease in these relative rates has been the result not only of a decrease in absolute terms but also stems from the fact that the per capita income of the richest regions have grown faster than that of the poor regions, increasing inequality gaps between countries (Geda 2004).

Some studies claim also that there has been little or no change in national levels of income distribution (Gustaffson and Johansson 1999; Melchior et al. 2000). In effect, the information provided by the database of the United Nations indicates that national income inequality in most developed countries, developing and centrally planned economies had declined in the decades between 1950 and 1980 (UN/WIDER 2004). However, since the eighties, this decline has slowed down or simply stopped and internal inequalities have increased again (Cornia 2004). Studies from different databases have reached the same conclusion, and describe a significant increase in intra-country income inequality over the past two decades (Atkinson 2003, Harrison and Blustone 1988).

Reinforcing what is suggested here, analysis of the UN/WIDER data shows that, between 1950 and 1980, intra-country income inequality increased in 48 of the 73 countries for which sufficient data exist. Taken together, these countries account for 59 percent of the total population of countries in the sample. If in the early eighties, 29 of the 73 countries had higher Gini coefficients than the limit of 0.35 to 0.45, until the late 1990's the number of countries with high income inequality had risen to 48. During the same period, intra-country inequality remained constant at 16, but worsened in 3 of them in recent years. Among the 73 countries surveyed, only 9 showed a drop in the levels of inequality: Bahamas, Philippines, France, Honduras, Jamaica, Malaysia, Korea and Tunisia (Cornia et al. 2004).

Whereas it is generally expected that inequality has increased in most developing countries, many have been surprised to learn that the same has happened in a good number of industrialized countries. Despite difficulties in establishing rigorous comparisons, there is evidence to support that in a sample of the nine richest OECD countries, with the possible exception of Canada, in all of them, income distribution worsened, and in some of the others, among them Finland, the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, the increases in inequality have been so bad as to widen by more than 10 Gini points in the last two decades. Evidence indicates that technological change and globalization have been responsible for the deterioration in income inequality. Something similar has happened in the so-called Southeast Asian Tigers. If they had been examples of how to harmonize economic growth and social equity in the 80s, since the end of the decade, especially in the 1990s, a sharp increase in inequality has also become widespread among them. In some cases, the increase in inequality is related as well to a growing urban-rural disparity in income (Atkinson 2003; Cornia et al. 2004).

Historically, higher levels of income inequality have been a common trait in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. An ECLAC study shows that during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, with very rare exceptions, the Gini coefficient of the countries in the region has been at the highest levels in the world, ranging between 0.45 and 0.55 (Sainz 2004). In the 1970s, income inequality has decreased moderately in the region, but recurrent external shocks and the debt crisis in the 1980s have provoked the return of higher levels in the income distribution inequality (Altimir 1996). The sole exception appears to be Brazil, which has witnessed a moderate decrease in income inequality since 2005. Even countries that had achieved a more equitable distribution of wealth were among those who were more affected by the economic crisis. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, income distribution in the region worsened further, and almost all countries showed high Gini coefficients (Ocampo 2004, World

Bank 2004a). Besides a long history of inequality in many countries, including Bolivia, Brazil and Guatemala, among others, the empirical evidence shows that factors such as race and ethnicity continue to occupy a privileged space in explaining inequality of opportunity and in the distribution of wealth: populations of African and indigenous origins have incomes that are 35 to 65 percent lower than that of the white population, and have much less access to education and housing.

A further aspect that distinguishes patterns of inequality in Latin America from other regions of the world is the amount of wealth in the hands of rich households (10 percent at the top of the income.) In the 1990s, they controlled 30 percent of the total income, increasing their share of total income at the end of the decade to 35 and even 45 percent in some countries, while the stratum of the poorest 40 percent saw their share decline to between 15 and 9 percent of total income in 2000. This trend is confirmed by the fact that the share of total income in the hands of the richest 10 percent grew even more in eight countries, remained the same in one and decreased slightly in five (Ocampo 2004, World Bank 2004a).

Finally, structural reforms in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past two decades have contributed significantly to the increase in inequality. Despite the stated goal that such reforms would produce more economic growth and better social welfare, actual results have been strikingly negative, with long term consequences. Argentina and Venezuela were clearly the most affected and are the countries where inequality has grown the most in the region. Meanwhile, the largest income gaps are still found today in Brazil, despite the significant achievements of recent years, where the richest 10 percent continues to receive 32 times more income than the poorest 40 percent. The lowest levels of inequality have been found historically in Uruguay and Costa Rica, countries where the distance between the wealth held by the richest 10 percent is 8.8 and 12.6 times that of the poorest 40 percent, respectively. Despite the difficulty in finding comparable data for all countries, other indicators suggest that Cuba may have maintained the lowest levels of inequality in the distribution of income, despite the alarming deterioration of its economy in much of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century (Sainz 2004).

In other words, a number of purely economic factors hinder a sustained decline in socioeconomic gaps, including poor distribution of economic growth, high unemployment, heavy external and public debts, trade barriers and, of course, structural inequalities of income. Historical deficiencies of the labor market have been compounded by new capital-intensive patterns of growth (the so-called *jobless growth* from the last decade.) Not surprisingly, the gap in income between the richest 20 percent of the

world population and the poorest 20 percent has quadrupled between 1960 and 2004, from 30 to 120 times (UNDESA 2005).

### **3. Increase in Non-Economic Inequality**

Many countries continue to face profound non-economic obstacles and challenges that end up undermining attempts to eradicate poverty and promote equality. On the sociopolitical level, such factors include social exclusion, discrimination in its various forms, political, ethnic, religious, racial and other, which results in lack of opportunities and power. The traditional approach to economic inequality has often been limited to addressing income differentials within and between countries, while important social dimensions are still neglected in data collection and analysis. Non-economic indicators are related to priorities such as health, education, access to basic needs (food, water, sanitation and housing), and opportunities for participation that are closely related to socioeconomic status at the individual, household and national levels. Typically, countries with the worst health and education systems are also found on the lowest rungs of economic development. Therefore, it is worth discussing trends demonstrated in recent years in non-economic indicators of inequality, including education, health, malnutrition and hunger

Contrary to the ideological promises of the reforms brought forth under the aegis of the Washington Consensus, concrete experience began to expose the shortcomings of economic liberalization policies pursued at the expense of social and environmental policies. Data indicate that even the OECD countries that have applied more strictly these policies are those that have also experienced increasing inequalities (Weeks 2004). In addition, World Bank studies clearly indicate that the financial crisis has caused a negative impact on the level of employment and of wages in general, and these effects have persisted despite the economic recovery in at the turn of the Millennium (World Bank 2000). Similarly, the analysis of the impact of structural adjustment programs promoted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund highlights the growth of poverty (Easterly 2001). Independent evaluations tend to indicate that the commitment to incorporate explicitly the reduction of poverty and social impact analysis of reform programs and loans from the World Bank and the IMF has not been met, instead a rhetorical relationship prevailed between social and macroeconomic proposals and reforms (Norad 2003). The Bank itself has acknowledged the existence of an “implementation gap” or, more specifically, no link between the discourse and practice of incorporating social dimensions into macroeconomic programs (World Bank 2004c).

Major global imbalances continue to characterize the area of education. Although many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean are on track to meet the Millennium Development Goals relating to enrollment in primary education, disparities still persist in education. In Latin America, for instance, where major inequalities still exist within and between countries, significant differentials in income derived from work are attributed to different levels of labor remuneration related to different educational levels (IPES 1999). In general, those that have 6 years of schooling receive 50 percent more in salary than those without formal education, and those who have attended school for 12 years are paid twice as high compared to the non-educated strata. In addition, the variable “education” explains 25 to 35 percent of the income concentration in that region. While education offers some degree of inter-generational mobility for different income strata, the prevailing tendency is that of transmitting the segmentation in education level from one generation to the other (Graaf and Kalmijn 2001).

There is no doubt that efforts to improve the health situation in the past five decades have been successful. Infant mortality rates have declined. More women have access to reproductive health methods and prevention of unwanted pregnancies, thereby reducing maternal mortality rates. Global statistics show progress in these and other areas of health, but they mask a great diversity of conditions across countries and regions. Also, as a result of the asymmetries that characterize the current wave of globalization, the statistics obscure the fact that the benefits that reach the poorest countries represent a tiny fraction of the benefits derived from the impressive scientific and technological progress of modern medicine. Poorer countries are less likely to access, among other things, the most advanced diagnostic technologies, medicines and vaccines.

Life expectancy at birth has increased globally from 47 to more than 65 years in the past five decades, although the statistics reveal a gap of 36 years between the regions with lower and higher life expectancy. Since the middle of the last decade, the region of Australia and New Zealand has had the highest life expectancy, 77-79 years, while poorer regions have experienced significantly less progress. If one compares not only regions, but all individual countries with Japan, that has a life expectancy at birth of 82 years, and considering just the periods 1990-1995 and 2000-2005, a very differentiated distribution becomes evident. While, in general, there was a decrease in the number of countries with a distance of over 10 years from the life expectancy in Japan, which implies a slight decrease in inequality between countries in this matter, there was a considerable increase in the number of countries where life expectancy is less than 35 to 50 years lower than that of Japan (United Nations 2002).



Infant mortality has decreased between 1990 and 2001, although to a lesser extent in developing countries. The general progress of immunization to the most deadly diseases accounts for the significant decline in infant mortality. However, data on demographic and health surveys indicate that the mortality rates of children with less than five years of age remain one and half times higher in rural areas. Among all health indicators, maternal mortality is the one that shows more pronounced inequalities between developed and developing countries. Ninety-nine percent of maternal deaths occur in developing countries. In poor countries, up to 30 percent of deaths among women of reproductive age (15-49 years) are caused by pregnancy-related causes, compared with less than one percent in developed countries. In 2000, there were 400 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in poor countries, a rate 19 times higher than in rich countries. The risk of death of a mother in a developing country was 1 in 61 in 2000, 460 times higher than the risk of 1 in 28,000 in developed countries (WHO 2005b).

The impressive increase in agricultural productivity and the development of more advanced production and food preservation systems have led to a world of plenty in the last century. Since the 1970s, global food production has tripled, and prices of major primary products have fallen nearly 80 percent. In the last decades of the twentieth century, the planet, which until then had never been able to produce enough food to meet the needs of a population that was growing exponentially, produced enough food for everyone. If this production was distributed evenly in the world, and if it was not heavily concentrated on animal feed and energy purposes, there would be enough food so that all people could consume an average of 2,760 calories per day (WIT 2005). However, food emergencies have dramatically increased in recent decades, which often led to famine and malnutrition crisis associated with large increases in mortality rates. In fact, the number of such emergencies has increased from an average of 15 per year during the 1980s to more than 30 annually since 2000. Most of these events occurred in Africa, where the annual average has tripled. In mid-2004, 35 countries experienced food crises requiring emergency assistance (FAO 2004).

As a result, in many parts of the world a significant proportion of the population still suffers from nutritional deprivation, characterized by insufficient or inadequate consumption of protein and nutrients and by frequent infections and diseases. That condition, long-term and structural in nature, receives little public attention, despite the fact that more and more people die from the indirect effects of hunger. In 2004, poor nutrition affected up to 852 million people worldwide, of which 815 million lived in developing countries, 28 million in so-called “transition countries” (for the most part, countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe), and 9 million in the industrialized world. One-fifth

of the population in developing countries were undernourished (FAO 2004), and this number keeps growing in absolute and relative terms.

Poor nutrition has been traditionally one of the main causes of infant mortality, and it accounts for almost half of the 10.4 million child deaths every year in poor countries. Children who manage to survive still suffer the effects of poor nutrition or malnutrition for the rest of their lives, with reduced cognitive skills and low school attendance, low productivity and wages, and are exposed to diseases and various forms of disability. The height and weight of approximately one third of children in developing countries are well below the estimated average for their age, and it is estimated that over 3.7 million child deaths in 2000 were directly associated with underweight. In economic terms, for each year that malnutrition continues at current levels (it has actually grown worse), developing countries lose an estimated \$500 billion of income as a result of premature death and disability (FAO 2004; WHO 2005a).

At the opposite end of the nutritional spectrum, over-nutrition (excessive caloric intake) has also become a pandemic (WHO 2005b). In the world today there are more than one billion overweight adults and at least 300 million of them are clinically obese. Levels of obesity have been increasing dramatically in rich countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States and in Europe. Yet obesity is increasingly affecting poor countries (Chopra et al. 2002, Flegal et al. 1998).

Progress in reducing poverty and inequality is also constrained in many instances by low levels of governance and the absence of channels and means for citizen participation. It is therefore politically foolhardy to ignore the social inequality in the pursuit of higher levels of economic growth. Moreover, it could also be disastrous for the environmental sustainability. Focusing exclusively on economic growth and income generation as the core of a development strategy has proven ineffective. It can lead to the accumulation of wealth by a few, but at the expense of increased poverty and inequality for most, and also at the cost of our natural heritage. Needless to say, such a strategy undermines the ethical priorities in relation to future generations.

Despite this current predicament, the international economic agenda is still dominated by issues of free trade, intellectual property protection, financial and capital liberalization, and investment protection. The international trade regime, structural reforms and adjustment programs of recent decades, as well as market reforms still on the move, have characterized the economic and institutional context in which financial and trade liberalization have been carried out. In general, such changes have negative effects for individuals, groups and entire communities. Although theories of “economic



convergence” suggest that increasing integration between countries in the wake of globalization should promote greater convergence of income levels and an equivalent decrease in inequality and poverty, empirical evidence seems to reject these optimistic assumptions. A significantly increasing number of studies questions whether today’s globalization may indeed contribute to poverty reduction and economic and non-economic inequalities.

#### **4. Patterns of Consumption and the Growing Equality Gap**

The study of current patterns of consumption offers further insight on the welfare of individuals, clearly supplementing a purely economic approach to poverty and inequality. Such patterns are an important measure of social exclusion, because they establish a distinction between those ‘with’ and those ‘without’ access to resources, goods and services. This can also shed light on the processes of relative deprivation to which certain social groups are subjected. Information on growth rates observed in domestic consumption over the end of the last century did vary considerably between regions. In the past 25 years, household consumption grew at average rates of 2.3 percent annually in industrialized countries and 6.1 percent in East Asia, while in Africa and many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the level has actually decreased by 20 percent over the same period (UNDP 1998).

At the end of the last decade, the richest 20 percent living in higher-income countries accounted for 86 percent of total private consumption expenditure, while the poorest 20 percent consumed just 1.3 percent. Another illustration of the inequalities in consumption at the start of the new millennium is that the richest 20 percent hold 74 percent of all telephone lines and consume 45 percent of meat and fish available, 58 percent of the energy and 87 percent of paper, while the poorest 20 percent hold only 1.5 percent of phone lines, consumed 5 percent of meat and fish, 4 percent of total energy and less than 1 percent of the paper. As indicated by such levels of consumption, the material benefits of growth are overwhelmingly monopolized by the richest in the rich countries (UNDP 1998).

With the swelling of a new elite composed of the winners who have benefited most from globalization, new consumption patterns have emerged in developing countries, mimicking those prevailing in the rich world. Conspicuous consumption is widespread in many regions of the world, the desire to access status through consumption has become the same both for the marginalized and the more economically fortunate, and unnecessary consumption pressures are more evident as countries become more open to international trends. However, if the consumption practices of the hundreds of

millions of rich elites were diffused to even half of the estimated population of almost 9 billion people in 2050, the impacts on the availability of land, water, energy and other natural resources would be devastating.

Precisely because the poor in developing countries tend to live on marginal lands, they are more vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation. These areas possess low agricultural potential and are susceptible to flooding, landslides, droughts, erosion and other forms of deterioration. Salinization of soils has been identified as the main cause of land degradation and it accounts for a total loss of three acres of farmland every minute. It is estimated that over 350 million people are directly dependent on forests for their survival, while demand for land for agricultural use and production of wood and paper products has accelerated the deforestation process in our countries (World Bank 2004b).

In fact, suboptimal levels of consumption and hunger of the population, and especially the great distance between the expectations and the realities faced, generate livelihood tactics and actions of social economy, but also acts of violence, while lavish and wasteful consumption leads to the production of increased levels of trash, waste and pollution, as well as injustice and iniquity. At the same time, an important part of natural resources are treated like venture capital, generating revenues that accumulate in the commodification process, and even in futures markets and other derivative products. The resources are not used to benefit the community, nor with those obtained by extraction or use, to generate alternative sources of wealth for the time when non-renewable resources are exhausted or are replaced. Paradoxically, today forms of appropriation destructive to both environment and habitat coexist with great waste in the use of the potential of natural resources and energy sources within highly fragile and vulnerable systems. The systemic nature of problems both demands and constrains the necessary articulation of alternatives that aim to combat poverty and reduce inequalities through the implementation of structural solutions.

## **5. Inequality, Poverty and Worsening Environmental Crisis**

Historical challenges caused by a socially exclusionary and resource-wasteful style of development have become increasingly magnified as a result of global environmental change, whose most dramatic and urgent expression is probably climate change. Existing inequalities have become more complex to overcome as well, due to the increasing environmental vulnerability, and its effects are felt even more strongly when natural events turn into human disasters.

In the 1990s, more than 700 thousand people lost their lives due to “natural disasters” (or rather, natural phenomena turned into disasters by human action or inaction), and more than 90 percent of the victims were from developing countries (UNEP 2002; Worldwatch Institute 2003). Alone in 2002, torrential rains in Kenya displaced more than 150,000 people, while over 800,000 people were suffering the effects of the worst drought in China in more than a century. In December 2004, the earthquake and tsunami that devastated parts of Southeast Asia revealed with dramatic overtones the effects of social-environmental inequities. Addressing the General Assembly during a meeting to discuss the tsunami and the long-term efforts for recovery and reconstruction of the affected areas, the former UN Secretary-General recalled that, “We know from experience that the poor always suffer the most enduring damage from such natural disasters” (Annan 2005).

Recent studies suggest that the economic and human cost of climate change by 2015 could reach up to 250 billion dollars annually and account for the loss or displacement of 375,000 lives. A recent report estimates that by 2020, the net increase of people subjected to water-related risks in Latin America due to climate change will be between 7 and 77 million. Moreover, for the second half of the century, the likely reduction of water availability and the increasing demand posed by a growing population will increase these estimates to between 60 and 150 million people (IPCC 2007, Table 13.6).

There is no doubt that most of the human and economic losses will be dealt with in developing countries. Oxfam, for example, analyzing the 6,500 disasters directly related to climate change since 1980, indicates that on average 23 people die per reported disaster in developed countries, while in poor countries that average is 1,052 casualties (Oxfam 2009: 4).

Inequalities in access to resources are also important in relation to human-induced disasters. With increasing land degradation in many regions, millions of people are unable to produce enough food for their survival. Such situations increase social tensions and the social-environmental vulnerability may trigger conflict and mass migration. In many developing countries it has been competition and the struggle for control of scarce resources that led to violent clashes between dominant groups in an effort to subjugate and marginalize indigenous groups and local people in order to ensure access to its resources and land. Famines can and have caused civil wars in Africa since the 1970s, generating a vicious circle whereby the conflict reduces the availability of resources and feeds back indefinitely the competition for their control.

Altering consumption patterns in general represents an extremely difficult task, despite the urgency to stop excessive consumption processes, such as United Nations has warned more than 30 years ago, when it called for the Rio Conference: “the main cause of the continuing global environmental degradation is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries”. Brazil echoed these warnings by stating in the document that led to Rio-92 that “in situations of extreme poverty, the human being, impoverished, marginalized or excluded from society and the economy has no commitment to avoid environmental degradation once society fails to prevent its own degradation as a person “(Guimarães 1991: 24).

One of the most urgent actions at global level is the establishment of a global minimum standard for social protection, in order to stabilize incomes, distribute the benefits of financial globalization and trade and allow the emergence of new opportunities for productive and social progress. An international standard defined in such terms would most certainly represent the antidote to the often called “race to the bottom” that constrains policies and social or environmental regulations in developing countries due to the pressures of spurious international competitiveness – represented by subsidies and other unilateral protectionist measures. Harmonizing the provisions of the WTO with other multilateral agreements that preceded it and succeed it in social and material environment remains an urgent and also pending task.

## **6. The (Politically Motivated) Myth of Scarcity of Financial Resources**

The political difficulties to overcome the current dilemma of unsustainable development exacerbated by climate change are many. While, for example, Official Development Assistance (ODA) reached in 2007, approximately \$6 billion, migrant remittances amounted, globally, to over \$400 billion – of which \$66.5 billion to Latin America and the Caribbean. This means that remittances were equivalent to 10 times the ODA and surpassed the totals of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) and ODA (BID 2008).

It is estimated that the rescue of the recent financial crisis has cost so far between 11 and 14 trillion dollars (Cintra and Farhi 2009), three times the cost to rebuild Europe after World War II, and almost 40 times the cost estimated to stop and reverse emissions of greenhouse gases. If one calculates the rescue packages in relation to the combined population of Europe, USA and Japan (\$930 million), the fact is that there was given away directly to financial institutions in bankruptcy the equivalent of almost \$60,000 for each household in those countries, while the insolvency of families, unemployment and bankruptcies caused by financial speculation are virtually at the same pre-crisis

levels. In fact, this estimate is too conservative. Taking into account the US Census Bureau estimates, 1.5 million people were directly affected by the housing debacle, and even considering an equivalent number of affected people in Europe and Japan, the rescue of financial institutions amount to incredible \$500,000 per capita, probably higher than the mortgages themselves.

In other words, the eternal argument of scarce economic and financial resources to promote equality and tackle poverty and global environmental changes, whose more disturbing facet is climate change - fell apart in just a few weeks, and rendered power actors visible and clearly identifiable, individually and socially, crudely revealing the real political face of the “invisible” hand of the market. Ultimately, the persistence and even aggravation of the various forms of inequality and global and national imbalances and asymmetries can no longer be tolerated by a society that claims to be civilized.

Thanks to the vast global wealth accumulation – unparalleled in history– and thanks to the increasing availability of financial resources and scientific and technological innovations, there are no more excuses for the fact that the largest share of the world’s population must live in extreme exclusion and conditions of poverty. Macroeconomic policies and reforms in financial and trade liberalization, together with changes in the world of labor can no longer be disconnected from the struggle to expand the world of prosperity and equity for all regions and social sectors.

It is precisely in this context that efforts should be channeled to ensure that the reforms driven by market forces, by the multilateral trading system and other rules, institutions and actors that govern the web of international economic relations are not allowed interfere with or impede the possibilities of realization of the most progressive dimensions of sustainable development. The active struggle in the construction of such possibilities and alternatives represents only a prerequisite for reducing poverty and inequality, strengthening social integration and preserving the planet. It is, in fact, an ethical and moral imperative of mankind and of each individual.

## **7. Towards an Agenda for Research on Environment and Inequality in Latin America**

The reflections, analysis and comments introduced so far suggest some priorities for research on the environment-inequality nexus. The framework suggested by the basic document for the 2009 seminar CLACSO-CROP on “Poverty, Environment and Climate Change” serves as an adequate starting point. It is indicated in the text that the best way to advance sustainable adaptation to inevitable climate change is

the immediate eradication of extreme poverty and the reduction of the most glaring economic and non-economic forms of inequalities, calling for radical changes in theory and practice. The failure to generate productive employment, the concentration of land and resources and the increasing difficulties to maintain suitable habitat in the cities constitute insurmountable obstacles if no dramatic changes take place. Given this situation, survival strategies have emerged for an important part of the population, but even so, adaptation as a survival strategy adopted by the poorest groups tends to produce negative effects on food security, biodiversity conservation and land use, etc (CLASCO-CROP 2010).

This means, for global change and not just climate change, that the most effective and non-discriminatory way to define the links between poverty and environment is around the concept of “responsibility” for the sustainable use of resources and services and, through them, the procurement of goods and services necessary for the welfare of society. The responsibility also refers to the fair treatment of vulnerable populations and future generations. A key challenge is to go beyond the simplistic misconceptions spread by the global development agencies or the dominant political discourse about the relationship between poverty and global environmental change. We must move towards a multidisciplinary perspective that articulates social sciences, natural sciences and humanities, as well as other forms of local and ancestral knowledge. It is important to keep these in the forefront of the analytical perspective of social sciences, humanities and natural sciences with a sense of ethics for the treatment of complex problems (CLACSO-CROP 2010).

In a predominantly impressionistic approach, without suggesting an order of priority between subject areas, here are some components of a research agenda on environment and social-economic inequalities in Latin America:

1. At the outset, a research agenda on entangled inequalities requires updating and generalizing to the entire region studies on consumption patterns and their distribution among different social groups. What is required in this case is to clarify the structural aspects of consumption in the region and how this impacts poverty, income distribution and social assets, as well as access to environmental resources.
2. Equally important is to supplement this with the identification of current patterns of production that are being consolidated in each of our countries – most countries have returned to the historical pattern of commodities exports and extractive industries. This will definitely determine the possibilities of reducing poverty, inequality and socio-environmental vulnerability.



3. At the macro level, there are still studies pending about the implications of international trade and regional integration schemes for the productive structure of our countries and for the prospects of economic policies that favor the use of environmental resources in the region to reduce poverty and inequality. There are clear indications, unfortunately few of them studied so far, that international trade rules, intellectual property rights and international economic regulation are condemning the countries of the region to an even more unfavorable situation of periphery and loss of autonomy in defining national and inclusive projects for development.
4. From the social-environmental point of view, studies are urgently needed to identify areas that we know will be the most affected by climate change in the incoming years and determine the socioeconomic and environmental vulnerability of their populations. These studies cannot be carried out without a clear identification of international production patterns that have been consolidating recently, such as for soya crops and cattle, as well as other net exports of “virtual water” and other precious natural resources of the region.
5. In order to generate development alternatives, it makes sense to investigate the real possibilities of new patterns of economic growth and technological development based on the exploration of so-called “competitive advantages” offered by environmental and biodiversity services in most countries in the region. The fact that some economies, for example, have directed their efforts to solve the energy challenge that is characteristic of rich countries (such as replacing oil with biofuels), while missing out the full potential of power generation from non-conventional sources that are abundant the region (such as solar and wind) should be cause for deep concern, rather than public joy and national pride.
6. Closely related to this aspect, we should strengthen studies that seek to identify alternatives for local and community development, those which have indeed managed to address income generation and conservation of the environment, but in a limited, local scale. How to institutionally strengthen and replicate these experiences becomes a matter of strategic interest. Also, major private sector actions, framed within the so-called Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility still resent a closer, critical analysis.
7. We also need critical studies on the proposals for the improvement of solutions to global environmental changes, such as carbon trading as an effective mode of climate change mitigation. In addition to its palliative and “geo engineering” character, its

implications in terms of justice and trans-regional equity are still not sufficiently studied outside the purely economic sphere.

8. In parallel, we need to complement the above studies with the analysis of the existing institutional framework and the changes needed to address growing poverty and inequality, deepened by increased vulnerability in the wake of the global environmental changes. The dismantling of the state and of public administration in recent decades, and the transfer of government functions to private hands, increases the institutional difficulties in breaking the vicious cycle between poverty and environmental degradation.

There is no doubt that each and every item of a research agenda as suggested here requires a specific treatment, which goes beyond the scope of this analysis. Yet, as Antonio Machado's poetry indicates, "Wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking." (Machado 1912)

The failure to promote a general approach and specific policies for sustainable development can only lead to the perpetuation of the current crossroads of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation. Sooner or later, everyone will have to pay the price for social and environmental irresponsibility. Resurgence of violence and terrorism represent just the visible tip of an iceberg waiting to wreck a globalization process that has made so many positive inroads in social life worldwide.



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